

Regret and Repair

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Abstract

It is widely thought that emotions can be fitting or unfitting to their objects, but how should we think of the fittingness of emotions over time? I address this general question by examining the more specific case of regret. To see when regret and its dissipation might be fitting, I argue that we must look to the broader process in which regretting is embedded. I propose that regret is an essential stage in the process of what I call *repair* – a process that is *itself* fitting. Focus on repair yields a plausible account of regret that explains when it is fitting to feel it (or to cease to feel it). In particular, whether a particular instance of regret is fitting is partly determined by whether the process of repair in which it is embedded is fitting. Though I will describe plausible views of repair that assign an essential role to regret, I will not defend any specific version of such a view. My intention in this article is different: I wish to delineate a space of normative reflection that has not been acknowledged, namely, reflection about fitting emotional processes. How does regret fit among the various responses warranted by one's past mistakes? This question comes into focus when we see that the fittingness of individual emotional episodes might be determined by the fittingness of the processes of which they are elements. In the final section, I apply my view to recent debates about regret stirred by Parfit's case of the young girl's child. My fittingness account shows that far from an unusual, puzzling phenomenon, the case of the young girl is an instance of a general and familiar occurrence: the fitting diminution of regret.

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Among contemporary ethicists and philosophers of emotion, it is widely thought that emotions are rationally responsive to distinct qualities of their objects. Sometimes it is said that emotions constitute “perceptions of value” or that they “involve evaluative presentations” of value-laden features of their objects.¹ Amusement is responsive to the amusing features of its object, sadness to the saddening features of its object, anger to the angering features of its object, and so forth. It is also common to acknowledge that there might be prudential, moral, or other reasons for or against experiencing an emotion, and that such reasons might be good and even decisive, but that they do not pertain to the *fittingness* of the emotion they support or disfavor. Rather, emotions are fitting or unfitting due to facts about specific qualities of their objects. These facts are often said to give the *right kind of reason* for or against the relevant emotion.

This rough sketch of the rationality of emotions is appealing but significantly incomplete.² Amusement is a fitting first response to an amusing joke, but is it fitting to be amused all day long? And if one's amusement fades, does it follow that one no longer appreciates the humor of the joke? Similar questions arise about anger and sadness, as well as other emotions. Even as our judgment about the object remains the same over time, it may not

¹ See, for example, Solomon (1976), de Sousa (1987, 2014), Greenspan (1988), Roberts (1988), D'Arms and Jacobson (2000a, 2000b, 2014), but the list goes on.

² One way in which the account is incomplete has been widely discussed in the philosophical literature: what is the appropriate way to draw the distinction between right- and wrong-kind reasons? This has been thought to pose an especially urgent problem for fitting attitude theories of value, which attempt to analyze value in terms of evaluative attitudes endorsed as fitting. I will not be concerned with this problem here. For a review of fitting attitude theories and the wrong kind of reason problem, see Jacobson 2011.

seem fitting (nor likely) that our emotional state should also persist. How, then, should we think about the fittingness of emotions over time?

In what follows I address this general question by examining the more specific case of regret. Regret is fitting, for instance, when we make significant mistakes, moral or otherwise. While there are arguably some mistakes that are so serious as to warrant continuous regret, in most cases regret fittingly diminishes over time. Some may insist that the diminution of regret is unfitting but inevitable given our psychological make-up, or that it is unfitting but justified by other powerful reasons: the world moves on and we must continue with our lives. I do not wish to dismiss such views, but to consider what an alternative view might look like. It is true that there are often good extraneous reasons for the diminution or dissolution of regret, but might there also be cases in which fitting regret *fittingly* subsides?

To see when regret and its dissipation might be fitting, I argue that we must look to the broader process in which regretting is embedded. I propose that regret is an essential stage in the process of what I call *repair* – a process that is *itself* fitting. Focus on repair yields a plausible account of regret that explains when it is fitting to feel it (or to cease to feel it). In particular, whether a particular instance of regret is fitting is partly determined by whether the process of repair in which it is embedded is fitting. Though I will describe plausible views of repair that assign an essential role to regret, I will not defend any specific version of such a view. My intention in this article is different: I wish to delineate a space of normative reflection that has not been acknowledged, namely, reflection about fitting emotional processes. How does regret fit among the various responses warranted by one's past mistakes? This question comes into focus when we see that the fittingness of individual emotional episodes might be determined by the fittingness of the processes of which they are elements.

The essay has five sections. In the first, I present three cases of regret that provide my explanandum: I seek an outline of a theory of regret that can account for the common features of these cases and accommodate their differences. In particular, I argue that we need a theory that can account for the diminution of fitting regret. In the second section, I argue that an account of the diminution of fitting regret should explain why such diminution is fitting, not only why it is justified overall. In the third, and main section, I argue that the fitting occurrence and diminution of regret is explained by the fact that regret is an essential stage in fitting processes of moral, agential, and ethical repair. In the fourth section, I give examples of existing conceptions of moral, agential, and ethical repair that assign an essential role to regret. In the fifth and final section, I apply my view to recent debates about regret stirred by Derek Parfit's case of the young girl's child (Parfit 1984). My fittingness account shows that far from an unusual, puzzling phenomenon, the case of the young girl is an instance of a general and familiar occurrence: the fitting diminution of regret.

Before I begin, a preliminary remark is in order. I focus on the fittingness of regret, which, I will assume, is supported by normative reasons and tracks genuine value or disvalue. But the question of the normative significance of fittingness relations in general is a contentious one. There seem to be cases where we may plausibly speak of fitting envy, jealousy, contempt, or even hate. Although some believe that even in these cases the facts that make these emotions fitting give pro-tanto reasons of the right kind to experience them, it is not implausible to deny this and insist that fittingness is normatively insignificant in these cases. It may also seem

possible to concoct fittingness relations, just as we might make-up a game, or to give examples of objectionable social practices and systems of etiquette that define relations of fit. In these cases, too, fittingness does not seem to mark any genuine values or normative reasons. Alternatively, in cases where fittingness does carry normative weight, as it were, we may want an explanation for why this is the case. Finally, some hold that fittingness should be analyzed in terms of normative reasons, others propose that value is the fundamental notion, and yet others argue that fittingness is a normatively fundamental relation in terms of which all other normative relations should be understood (McHugh and Way 2016; Howard Forthcoming). In this essay, I intend to avoid these important and intricate issues; instead, I focus on an instance of fittingness that seems normatively significant and my aim is to clarify the structure of fittingness in this case. Any plausible account of the normative significance of fittingness would then have to accommodate the phenomenon I describe here, namely, the phenomenon of fitting processes.

1. Regret: cases and observations

Consider three cases, described in broad strokes.

Birthday party: I missed my friend's birthday party last week. I had promised to be there but didn't feel like going and made up an excuse. Now, I admit to myself it was wrong of me; I should have gone. Upon realizing this, I regret not going: I'm angry at myself and I feel guilty. Later, I talk to my friend and apologize, she forgives me and I make sure to keep my promises to her and not to let her down again. The crisis is resolved and we move on. While my judgment that I should have gone to the party remains unchanged, I no longer regret it. Indeed, it strikes me as unreasonable to dwell on the past, to continue to wish I had gone to the party or to feel the agonies and alienation associated with regret. And when enough time has elapsed, the question of whether I wish I had gone to the party may simply seem irrelevant. Regret was essential to my appreciation of the choice I had made, but it has not become a fixed feature of my mental life.

Morning train: I have an early meeting and decide to leave home in time to catch the 7AM train to work. When the moment arrives to take my coat and briefcase and leave the house, I linger: I take another sip of coffee and read another newspaper article. I arrive to the station moments after the train departed. I knew exactly when I had to leave the house to get to the station in time, I intended to do so, and yet I succumbed to momentary pleasures and inclinations. Standing on the vacant platform, regret rushes over me like a bucket of water. The next time I have an early meeting, I make sure not to give in to the temptations of my morning routine. In fact, I attend to my lapses in judgment and find better ways to balance my plans and my dispositions. Thinking back, I remember the time I missed the train and still think it was foolish of me, but I no longer feel regret nor am I disposed to ponder counterfactuals about what might have been had I left home on time.

Failed musician: I am not a musician, but in my youth I was and intended to remain one. I played the upright bass and studied composition. I played in jazz bands and in a symphony orchestra and performed regularly. Gradually, I realized that I wasn't good enough. Or, at least, I wasn't good enough by the standards I aspired to. This was a serious blow. I regretted not practicing more and not taking music lessons earlier in life, when I was a small child, as some of my friends did. Now that my dream seemed out of

reach, I felt lost. It pained me to watch my friends successfully pursue their musical ambitions. Their success made real for me the life I could not have. I was right to think that had I studied music earlier in life and practiced more than I did I would have likely been a better musician. In any case, today I have different passions and commitments and I no longer feel the relentless sense of regret I felt upon realizing that I had failed the project that defined my life at the time.

Each of the three cases depicts a different instance of regret – different in its phenomenology, in its flavor and feeling, and different in its characteristic thoughts. And yet we may recognize common features shared by the three variants of regret. In all three cases, regret involves a pained appreciation of a loss that is associated with some action or choice of the agent. Though in each case the agent is responsible for the regrettable choice or action in different ways, all three cases involve a sense of responsibility for bringing about the loss that regret itself registers. Moreover, all three cases involve something like a wish or preference that things were otherwise.³ Finally, the sense of loss and responsibility and the wish that things were otherwise are brought together in the agent’s judgment that he *should* have acted differently or at least that he had compelling reason to have acted differently.⁴ While I do not mean to suggest that these are necessary and sufficient conditions for regret, I propose that these features are typical of regret and should therefore be taken into account by a theory of regret.

Consider now the diachronic dimension of the agent’s response to his failure. First, in all three cases, regret seems to occur immediately after (or as) the agent realizes that he had failed in the relevant way. In other words, regret appears as a first reaction to the fact of failure. Second, in all three cases, other reactions, emotional and practical, follow in the wake of regret. And yet the initial regret seems to play an important role in enabling later attempts to address the failure: without regret subsequent adjustments, apologies, or compensations would not seem to address the original failure at all. Finally, in all three cases, regret is plausibly understood as an

³ A counterfactual wish or preference might be comparative or non-comparative. A comparative wish that things were otherwise is a wish that something else occurred instead of what in fact occurred; a non-comparative wish that things were otherwise is a wish that what in fact occurred did not occur. When I order a burger but later wish I had the schnitzel instead, I have a comparative wish, but if the burger gave me food poisoning I might simply wish I didn’t have it without having any replacement in mind, in which case I have a non-comparative counterfactual wish. Thus, merely wishing that things were otherwise does not rationally commit me to preferring the most likely alternative, or any alternative at all for that matter. This point undermines Jay Wallace’s claim that regretting past horrors that were necessary for the existence of the people we love and the objects of our attachments commits us to preferring a world where the people we love and the objects of our attachments did not exist (Wallace 2013). It seems to me that we can wish with all our hearts that past horrors did not occur and not be rationally committed to any specific alternative. I elaborate on this point in Na’aman Forthcoming.

⁴ In some cases, the agent might believe that he acted as he should (all-things-considered) but still regret the action in the non-comparative sense due to the strong reason against it. This is most clear in difficult moral decisions, where causing grave harm is inevitable either way but one option is clearly morally superior to the other. A person may then wish she had saved the person who died but not wish she had done so *instead* of saving the hundreds who now live. This non-comparative regret is also common in more humdrum cases in which a genuine loss is justifiably incurred, such as in the decision to stay home and work instead of meeting my good friend for drinks: I wish I went out with my friends, but I do not wish I had done so instead of staying home.

emotional experience that is distinct from the agent's negative judgment and that eventually subsides while the judgment remains unchanged.

Despite these commonalities, the kinds of failures or mistakes involved in each of the three cases are different. *Birthday party* depicts a broken promise to a friend, a moral failure. *Morning train* depicts a failure to follow through on one's intention, an agential failure. *Failed musician* depicts a failure to accomplish a goal that would make the agent's life meaningful, an ethical failure.⁵ The different kinds of failure may explain the different flavors of regret and the different ways in which the agent is responsible for the regrettable action or choice. For example, a moral failure may often call for an apology whereas an agential failure often requires some adjustment of one's dispositions of thought, motivation, and action. Finally, an ethical failure, whether due to the agent's choice or due to contingent events beyond the agent's control, involves a breakdown of meaning that often requires the agent's active effort to make sense of his past in a way that would make a meaningful future imaginable for him.

What makes these cases and observations relevant to ethical theory is the further claim, which I hereby put forward, that the features of regret exhibited in these three cases are not only common but commonly *appropriate*. We should therefore seek an account of regret that can explain the appropriate occurrence *and* diminution of regret, as well as the relation of regret to the agent's other warranted attitudes and emotions. Moreover, the theory we seek should account for cases in which the object remains regrettable, so that regret occurs and diminishes without implying a rational change in the agent's judgment about the object. Finally, the theory should accommodate the different kinds of failures as well as the different kinds of regret each of these failures calls for.

2. Toward a fittingness account

We can take one of two approaches to the construction of a theory of regret's diminution. One approach seeks to explain the diachronic aspects of regret in terms of what emotions and attitudes are justified overall at different moments; a different approach seeks to elaborate on the fittingness conditions of regret. To explain the difference between these approaches, we need to go back to a point I mentioned briefly at the outset. Justin D'Arms and Daniel Jacobson helpfully distinguish between, on the one hand, the fittingness or appropriateness of an emotion to its object and, on the other, its overall rational justification – whether it is what to feel, all things considered (D'Arms and Jacobson 2000a, 72). While an emotion can be fitting in the sense that it properly presents its object as having certain evaluative properties, the emotion might nevertheless be overall unjustified. For example, a cruel joke might be amusing and therefore amusement would be an appropriate or fitting response, but there might be moral reason not to be amused and this reason might render amusement overall unjustified. It is clear why I am

⁵ There is little agreement about the distinction between the moral and ethical, whether it exists and what it is. I do not mean to engage this issue here. Rather, I am using the term “moral” to refer to the kind of appropriateness that is invoked when it is said that someone was wronged or that someone is entitled to a certain treatment and I use the term “ethical” to refer to the kind of appropriateness that is invoked when it is said that an individual has lived a meaningful life. For reasons that will become clear in section 3, these notions are deliberately vague to allow for different views about what they consist in and how they relate to one another.

laughing at the joke, or what is amusing about it, but it is wrong to be amused. By contrast, the story of my sad childhood might not be amusing quite apart from any moral consideration. In this case, amusement is not (or not only) unjustified but unfitting: it does not make sense as a response to the story of my childhood.

The same point is sometimes put in terms of the right and wrong kind of reason for an emotion of a certain type.⁶ I have a right kind of reason not to be amused by a joke when the joke is not funny and a wrong kind of reason not to be amused when the joke is offensive, though both right and wrong kinds of reason can be genuinely normative reasons against being amused and, as such, good reasons.⁷ And while some have argued that moral flaws in jokes and comedies are inevitably comic flaws (Gaut 2007), the distinction between right and wrong kinds of reason stands. For instance, even if a morally inappropriate joke is not funny *because* morally inappropriate, the health-related benefits of laughter would provide another example of a wrong kind of reason to laugh at the joke (though, again, that laughter is healthy may be a *good* wrong kind of reason to laugh, one that genuinely counts toward the justification of laughter).

Similarly, we can distinguish between the fittingness or appropriateness of regret to its object – whether the object of a given occurrence of regret is regrettable in the relevant sense – and the overall rational justification of regret, considering both the right and wrong kinds of reason. That my choice was foolish or harmful is probably a right kind of reason to regret; that it was neither is a right kind of reason not to regret; that regretting my wrongs makes me a better person is a wrong kind of reason to regret; and that regret is unpleasant is a wrong kind of reason not to regret.

An account of the diachronic shape of regret that appeals to overall justification maintains that regret remains fitting long after it ceases to be justified overall. Such an account holds that we normally have a powerful wrong kind of reason to cease to regret, or not to focus on regret for too long, even though regret is no less fitting than it was when we first realized we made a mistake. Call this *the extraneous reason account of the rational diminution of regret* (or, for short, *the extraneous reason account*). On the alternative approach, which I will argue for, regret should diminish because it ceases to be fitting and not merely because or when the right kind of reason for it is outweighed by extraneous considerations. Call this *the fittingness account of the rational diminution of regret* (or *the fittingness account*).

It might seem, at first, that the extraneous reason account is our only viable option. Consider the following argument against the fittingness account. It is often said that the question of the fittingness of an attitude has to do with ways in which the object of the attitude is good or

⁶ It is a substantive claim that the distinction between right and wrong kind of reasons aligns with the distinction between reasons that make an attitude fitting and reasons that only justify it overall, but this alignment is widely accepted and it strikes me as very plausible. For more about why it is the case that the two distinctions align in this way, see (Howard Forthcoming).

⁷ Though a minority view, some argue that there are no wrong kind of reasons. See (Skorupski 2010; Way 2012). Such wrong-kind-of-reason skeptics take the view that facts that seem to give us the wrong kind of reason for attitudes in fact give us *incentives* for attitudes, which are the right kind of reasons to want to have these attitudes. I will continue to assume that there are reasons of the wrong kind, but for those who deny such reasons there is an even stronger need to seek a fittingness account of the diminution of regret since the external reason account is ruled out from the start.

bad (Olson 2004; Parfit 2011; D'Arms and Jacobson 2014). If the object is valuable in the relevant way then the attitude is fitting. Amusement is fitting if the joke is amusing, sadness is fitting if the occurrence is sad, and regret is fitting if the action is regrettable. Since the fittingness of the emotion is settled by the relevant value of the object there seems to be no conceptual space for diachronic fittingness of the diminution of that emotion. Just as the agent's rational judgment remains unchanged if the relevant value of the object remains unchanged, so does the fittingness of the correlative attitude or emotion. It then follows that regretting a regrettable action remains fitting because (and as long as) the action remains regrettable. If regret should subside while its object remains regrettable, this must be due to wrong-kind reason against regret, such as a combination of moral and prudential reasons to focus on what lies ahead.

This argument against a fittingness account of the diminution of regret fails because it presupposes as a substantive claim that which it aims to establish as a conceptual truth. The claim that what is regrettable is fittingly regretted is ambiguous between two interpretations. According to one interpretation, once something is regrettable it is fitting to regret it indefinitely; according to another interpretation, once something is regrettable it is fitting to regret it for a period of time. The first interpretation maintains that if X is regrettable at t_1 , then at all times after t_1 it is fitting to regret X. By contrast, the second interpretation holds that if X is regrettable at t_1 , then there is a time period t_2 (no earlier than t_1) during which it is fitting to regret X. If the argument against the fittingness account is interpreted in the first way, then it indeed follows that regret about what is regrettable never fittingly diminishes.⁸ But this claim is then revealed as a substantive assumption, presupposed without argumentation.

If we reject the first interpretation in favor of the second, however, then it is possible that after a period of time it is no longer fitting to regret what is regrettable. This interpretation makes room for the possibility that fitting regret may fittingly diminish. The fact that it is always fitting to regret what is regrettable does not imply that it is fitting always to regret it, but that it is always the case that regretting it for some period of time is fitting. On this interpretation, "always" in the locution "it is always fitting to regret what is regrettable," does not refer to the duration of fitting regret but to the a-temporal nature of a normative fact about regret – i.e., that it is fitting for some period of time if directed toward what is regrettable. The fittingness account of the diminution of regret reemerges as a candidate on equal footing with the external reason account.

Nonetheless, it might be true that it is fitting to regret what is regrettable indefinitely. After all, we identify the relevant value (or disvalue) of the object through considered judgments about regret, not about other emotions or attitudes, and when the value is present we say that the object is regrettable. It is therefore not mysterious why we should presuppose that as long as the object is regrettable regret is fitting. But it is also possible that regret is a *salient component* of a fitting response to what is regrettable. For instance, if regret is a powerful and fitting first response to what is regrettable then it may lend itself to characterizations of its proper object, but it would not follow that regret is always fitting to what is regrettable nor that it is the only fitting

⁸ To be precise, this follows under the plausible assumption that regret and its absence cannot both be fitting at one and the same time.

response to it. This possibility, that regret is a salient component of a fitting response to what is regrettable, is the possibility I wish to explore.

Furthermore, even if one finds compelling the view that regret is the *only* fitting response to what is regrettable, there remains the question about regret's fitting duration. D'Arms and Jacobson argue that considerations of fittingness can be divided into considerations of *shape* and considerations of *size* (2000a, 74-75). An emotional episode is unfitting in shape when it presents its object as having certain evaluative features the object in fact lacks; it is unfitting in size when it is disproportional to the evaluative features of its object. Regret is unfitting in shape if its object is not regrettable (no reason to cry over spilt milk if the milk is still safely in the bottle,) and regret is unfitting in size if it exaggerates the significance of its object (the milk is spilt, and that is regrettable, but there is no reason to cry because *it is only milk.*) But there is a third kind of considerations of fittingness that goes unmentioned by D'Arms and Jacobson, namely, considerations of *length*. What is the duration of a fitting emotion? How long should one regret in *birthday party, morning train, or failed musician*? Should we never cease to regret as far as the fittingness of regret is concerned? Should we regret longer the more serious our mistakes are? Or perhaps there are some serious mistakes that we should regret intensely but momentarily and less significant mistakes that should be regretted mildly but over a longer period? Is there a principled relation between the kind of failure or mistake (moral, agential, or ethical) and the duration of regret? A focus on the synchronic aspects of regret has left these issues unattended; we need a fittingness account of the diminution of regret to address these questions.

Finally, from the last point about length emerges a substantive reason to insist that the transmutations of regret and the emotions and attitudes that follow it should be understood in terms of fittingness. Consider: what is the relevant criticism of a person who continues to regret the wrong he committed but fails to apologize for it, to ask for forgiveness, or to commit never to repeat it? On an external reason account, this person fittingly regrets his wrong but fails to attend to important moral implications that follow from it. But it seems to me that such a person would be crucially criticizable in another way, namely, his regret would seem insincere, ill-conceived, or self-indulgent due to his failure to address the wrong he supposedly regrets. In other words, rather than fitting its object regret would strike us as oblivious to it. It therefore seems that an appreciation of the wrong one committed requires more than regret alone and less than perpetual regret: regret should be accompanied and followed by other attitudes, emotions, and actions. Without regretting the wrong, apologies and pleas for forgiveness would be unfitting and, conversely, the fittingness of regret, too, seems to depend on subsequent attitudes, emotions, and actions. Thus, a fittingness account seems more in line with our considered judgments about the interdependency of regret and its emotional descendants.⁹

⁹ To be clear, I am not suggesting here that in every case, or even in most cases, regret should completely disappear. We should probably continue to regret our wrongs while taking measures to compensate the victims, correct our ways, etc. The point is, rather, that a fittingly debilitating regret might often diminish (if not disappear) as part of a fitting, ongoing response to one's wrong. In fact, all that need be acknowledged in order to motivated a fittingness account of regret over time is that there are often fitting *changes* in regret, a claim that seems even more difficult to deny than the claim that regret often fittingly diminishes. That said, a fittingness account does not rule out the view that regret should not change over time, it simply implies that this is a substantive view about the fittingness of regret over time.

3. Regret as a stage in repair

We seek an account of the fitting occurrence and diminution of regret in cases where regret's object remains regrettable. In the previous section, we made conceptual space for such an account by raising the possibility that regret is a (salient) component of a fitting response to what is regrettable. We also considered some reasons to favor this possibility. What, then, is the whole of which regret is a component?

The fact that regret is often a crucial first stage in a fitting progression of emotions, attitudes, and actions that unfold over time suggests that regret is part of a fitting *process*.¹⁰ In *birthday party*, for instance, the wrongdoer fittingly regrets his wrong, but he also fittingly apologizes, asks for forgiveness, corrects his ways, etc. Something similar occurs in *morning train* and *failed musician*: the initial regret is followed by other responses to the failure. Furthermore, the process in question seems to be one through which the agent appreciates, addresses, and corrects the regrettable failures, insofar as doing so is possible. Regret therefore seems to be an initial and salient stage in a process prompted by failure and aimed at repair.

The invocation of repair might seem to profess a concern for the agent's psychological well-being. Regret would then be construed as a psychological "slump" necessary for the agent's eventual return to her emotional baseline. This psychological notion of repair seems immediately objectionable for three reasons. First, it renders regret too instrumental; second, it renders regret too self-serving; third, it relies on the controversial claim that regret is always necessary for the agent's emotional repair. I will not elaborate on these objections because even if we should regret in order to feel better, as it were, this is surely not a consideration that counts toward the fittingness of regret but only toward its overall rational justification. Regret is made fitting by the past toward which it is directed, not by its consequences. Since we seek a fittingness account, such considerations cannot be appealed to.

In fact, our three cases suggest that the notion of repair need not appeal to the agent's psychological well-being. Instead, as in *birthday party*, the idea of repair might appeal to the mending of the wrong done to the person wronged and the relationships disrupted by it—that is, insofar as such mending is possible through compensation, reparation, apology, forgiveness, etc. This is moral repair. As in *morning train*, the notion of repair might appeal to the correction of the agent's judgment and appropriate functioning, which manifests in adjustments of dispositions and intentions for the future. This is agential repair. And, finally, as in *failed musician*, the notion of repair might appeal to recovery from the agent's failure to live up to the commitments that

¹⁰ Thomas Hofweber and David Velleman explain the distinction between things that are processes and things that are not as a distinction between ways in which things have identity in time, some *endure* and others *perdure* (2010). A mental state, such as a conscious experience of a red cube, endures: "its identity is determined at every moment at which it exists" (1). In contrast, a process persists by perduring because its identity is not determined at every moment of its existence. Hofweber and Velleman describe the process of writing a check: "What there is of this process at a particular moment – the laying down of a particular drop [of ink] – is not sufficient to determine that a check is being written, and so it is not sufficient to determine which particular process is taking place..." (14). See also (Goldie 2012, 61). Accordingly, to suggest that regret is part of a process is to suggest that it is part of a whole the identity of which is not determined at every moment of its existence, for example, it might not be determined in the moment of regret.

give meaning to her life and define her as an individual person. This is ethical repair. Psychological repair might play a subsidiary role in our understanding of regret, but it seems to me that the other three notions of repair are explanatorily prior.

The three notions of repair all invoke basic aspects of our lives as persons and they are applicable when we fail as persons along one of these dimensions. There is no room for repair when we are *whole*. We are whole in the relevant sense when we are *properly functioning moral agents who lead meaningful lives over time*. This idea of wholeness is diachronic: a person who is not wronging anyone right now might still fall short of moral wholeness due to wrongs she committed in the past. Similarly, addiction impairs our agential wholeness even in those moments when it does not impede our conduct or skew our judgment. Some of us might be better than others at being whole – although I would not venture to say who, or how this might be determined – but only the holy are *always* whole. Repair is of fundamental importance due to the endemic frailty of human persons.

So far, we have put together the following rudimentary picture: when we fail in one of several dimensions of wholeness (moral, agential, or ethical,) it is fitting to engage in a process of repair that includes regret among its stages and aims at the restoration of wholeness. Now the following worry arises. When I rejected the psychological notion of repair, I said that it is implausible that regret is made fitting by its consequences. But the same worry seems to arise regarding the three notions of repair that I have put forward. It does not seem plausible to maintain that regret is made fitting by the goal of being morally, agentially, or ethically whole. The right reasons for regret, the reasons that make regret fitting, are given by facts about its object, which lies in the past.¹¹ This worry raises an important issue that requires a closer look at the relation between processes and their goals.

Distinguish, first, two possible relations between a process and its goal: a *merely causal* relation and a *constitutive* relation. A process bears a merely causal relation to its goal when it is designed to bring about a goal that is defined independently of it. By contrast, a process bears a constitutive relation to its goal when the execution of the process is part of the definition of the goal. If I want *to have a cake*, I can either buy one or bake one myself. Either way, the process would be merely causally related to having a cake – a goal defined independently of its production. However, if my goal is *to have baked a cake*, then, as in the previous case, I would also end up with a cake, but my goal would include the means by which I come to have the cake. In light of this difference, we may further distinguish between the *goal* of a process and its *end-state*. In merely causal processes, the goal is an end-state, such as the end-state of having a cake, but in constitutive processes the goal is an end-state produced in a certain way, such as the goal of having a cake baked by me.

Unlike the end-state of having a cake, some end-states are defined as goals, which is to say that they are defined by the way in which they are produced. To be the winner of a game of

¹¹ Compare Cholbi 2017, who makes a parallel but stronger claim about grief. Cholbi holds that the right-kind reasons for grief are backward-looking and that grief cannot be rational if there is no right-kind reason for it: “Grief ... derives its essential rationality from the objects it responds to, not from the attitudes causally downstream from that response, and is necessarily irrational when the behaviors that constitute an individual’s grieving are inappropriate to the object of that grief” (Cholbi 2017, 257).

basketball, to obtain a PhD, or to have a friend, is to have gone through processes of certain kinds.¹² Of course, there are various ways to get a trophy, possess a diploma, or have a drink with Charlie, but for these things to count as winning the game, having a PhD, or having a friend, they must have the relevant history. That is to say: they must have been brought about in a certain way.¹³

Being whole, I will now argue, is more like having a friend than having a cake. It is an end-state defined by the way it is produced. More specifically, in the aftermath of failure, wholeness is the completion of a fitting process of repair of which regret is an essential stage. To see why I am led to this conclusion, assume the contrary, namely, that wholeness is an end-state defined *independently* of its process of production. It would follow that the process of repair can only bear a causal relation to wholeness. But as we saw in the example of psychological repair, the consequences of regret cannot make regret fitting: whether it is fitting to regret our past failures does not depend on regret's causal contribution to our future repair. This implication is avoided if moral, agential, and ethical wholeness are defined by the processes that bring them about. It would follow that the fittingness of the processes is not determined by their end-states. Rather, to have failed along any one of these dimensions and be made whole again is, by definition, to have undergone a *fitting* process of repair. Instead of the end-state determining the fittingness of the process, the fitting process determines the end-state. Thus, if a fitting process of repair includes regret as an essential stage, then fitting regret is partly constitutive of the goal of wholeness. To put it in a slogan: regret does not aim at repair, it is part of it (just as friends enjoying one another's company is not the aim of friendship, but part of it).

Indeed, even if regret fittingly diminishes by the end of the process, it remains a component of its historically defined goal. This is a significant implication. If an agent fails morally, for example, but manages to return to her emotional baseline without having undergone a fitting process of repair, and particularly without regretting her moral failure, then despite her psychological recovery she is not morally whole. Moreover, even if both the wrong-doer *and* the person wronged by her find ways to genuinely relieve themselves of the emotional and psychological burdens of the past without regretting it, such psychological reconciliation would fall short of moral repair.¹⁴ This is so for the same reason that buying a trophy at an auction does

¹² Although some processes are more clearly defined than others, such as getting a PhD in comparison to forging a friendship. For the view that friendship entails a relationship with a certain kind of history, see Kolodny 2003.

¹³ We find a useful analogy to the distinction between merely causal and constitutive processes in John Rawls' distinction between, on the one hand, perfect and imperfect procedural justice and, on the other hand, pure procedural justice. The required outcome of perfect and imperfect procedural justice can be specified independently of the procedure that brings it about. Perfect procedures are *guaranteed* to bring about the required outcome while imperfect procedures are only *likely* to bring about the required outcome. For example, a procedure of criminal justice, which aims to convict the guilty and only the guilty, cannot guarantee success but might be sufficiently reliable and therefore count as a procedure of imperfect procedural justice. However, pure procedural justice obtains when there is no criterion for the right outcome other than the execution of a correct or fair procedure (Rawls 1971, 86). For example, when applied fairly, a gambling procedure renders its consequences legitimate, whatever they are.

¹⁴ With a moralized conception of psychological health, one might argue that such reconciliation would not even constitute psychological repair. But this only strengthens my basic point: that repair is an ethical matter that cannot be settled by appeals to "naturalized" notions of health and well-being.

not make me a champion: the relevant end-state is defined by the process even if some of its characteristics are not.

However, psychological recovery might sometimes be unfitting even at the end of a fitting process of repair. The fact that regret is part of wholeness in the wake of failure makes room for the possibility that regret might fittingly persist. Though the diminution of regret is frequently part of a fitting process of repair, the lingering of at least some degree of regret even after the process is completed is often fitting. For instance, it is fitting that a perpetrator of serious wrongs continues to experience regret long after she was properly forgiven, having shown genuine regret and bettering her ways. The wrong-doer's eventually-fitting regret might not be as agonizing and debilitating as her initially-fitting regret, but it would certainly involve a significant emotional burden. Some such accumulated burden becomes practically inevitable as we get older. Because we are human, our collective and individual histories are riddled with regret and loss. But such regret need not hold us hostage to the past; it may be the vessel by which we carry the past with us into the future. Thus, even if regret may fittingly diminish throughout the process of repair, the attainment of repair does not entail the complete dissolution of regret. Repair should not be conflated with relief.

In what way, then, does a conception of wholeness (i.e., of being a properly functioning moral agent who leads a meaningful life over time) guide us? Being whole need not, and probably should not be our ideal or primary goal. Rather, it is what we are when we properly and morally pursue meaningful goals, projects, relationships, activities, and ideals, and when we complete processes of repair in the wake of failures. In principle, a person may be whole without being especially reflective and certainly without having general, abstract thoughts and ideas about morality, agency, or meaningfulness in life. Moreover, it is normally inappropriate or wrong to prioritize the goal of being whole over our personal and moral commitments. When we show basic respect toward a person, it is she who is the primary focus of our attention, not our own moral faultlessness; when we take the necessary means to our ends, we are concerned with our ends, not with our proper agential functioning; and when we fail or succeed in our life projects, we focus our attention primarily on the fate of our projects, not on meaningfulness.

However, it might sometimes be appropriate to consider our wholeness – for instance, when in the aftermath of a failure we reflect on what had gone wrong. And it is also significant that to undergo a fitting process of repair, an agent must be attuned to the structure of the process. It is unlikely the agent would appropriately transition from one stage to the next due to some innate sense or through sheer coincidence.¹⁵ The agent's apprehension of the process is required, but her conception of repair need not be explicit. When we play basketball or forge friendships we are often guided by conceptions of the relevant processes and activities without ever making them fully explicit, even in our own thought. This strikes me as true of many processes in which we actively partake. The agent's conception of the fitting process of repair guides her through the process but it usually does so implicitly or indirectly, and without the agent being fully conscious of it. Generally, being whole is a higher-order property of a person's functioning over time rather than a substantive commitment.

¹⁵ I thank Michael Bratman for pressing me to clarify this point.

Finally, let me clarify two points. First, I have been using the word “failure,” which might give the impression that whenever a person falls short of wholeness she is at fault. However, there might be failures of wholeness that are not the person’s fault in any way. Such are common failures of meaning due to the death of a beloved friend or family member, or failures of agency due to torture or abuse, or moral failures in cases of genuine moral dilemmas or bad moral luck. Failures of wholeness primarily impact the person whose wholeness is at stake, but they need not be the person’s fault. Nonetheless, the agent is inevitably responsible for them in the sense that the burden of repair is upon her shoulders, whether the failure was her fault or not, and regardless of others’ willingness to help.

Second, I intend the idea of wholeness and the corresponding idea of repair to be general enough to accommodate different views about the relation between the moral, the agential, and the ethical. At first blush, and prior to any systematic account, the moral, agential, and ethical can come apart. It seems we may effectively pursue meaningful goals in morally objectionable ways; we may be morally beyond reproach and yet fail to pursue our meaningful goals; or we may be morally beyond reproach and properly pursue goals that are not meaningful. But most systematic theories of practical reason, agency, and morality, subordinate some of these dimensions to others. May the requirements of morality be derived from those of agency? May the requirements of morality, agency, and meaningfulness in life be derived from one’s substantive normative reasons? Could there be an agential failure that is not a failure of meaning in life? I intend the concept of repair to be neutral between answers to these and other related questions. Philosophers may share the *concept* of repair while disagreeing about the proper *conceptions* of repair along each of the three dimensions that I have canvassed here.¹⁶

In fact, there are existing conceptions of repair in contemporary philosophical literature. In the next section, I consider three existing conceptions of repair that I find plausible. Each is an example of a different dimension of repair – moral, agential, and ethical – and all assign a constitutive role to regret. In considering these accounts I do not assume that they are uncontroversial. I consider them only to demonstrate that there are serious philosophical theories of repair that rely on a substantial notion of regret and allow for regret’s diminution. I take this fact to provide further evidence that the rationality of regret can be illuminated by the context of repair.

4. Three conceptions of repair

4.a. Moral repair:

Charles Griswold has put forward a subtle and compelling account of forgiveness, which I will now consider as an example of a process of moral repair that requires regret. In the

¹⁶ The concept/conception distinction was famously drawn by John Rawls. Rawls distinguishes between the *concept of justice*, understood as its role, and *conceptions of justice*, understood as accounts of the requirements and principles that fulfill the role in question. Thus, we may agree that institutions are just when no arbitrary distinctions are made between persons in the assigning of basic rights and duties and when the rules determine a proper balance between competing claims to the advantages of social life, and yet we may disagree about what counts as an “arbitrary distinction” and what is involved in a “proper balance” (Rawls 1971, 5).

paradigm case, Griswold argues, forgiveness is the forswearing of resentment and revenge where such forswearing is done for moral reasons (Griswold 2007, 40).¹⁷ The conditions for forgiveness must be such that it does not collapse into forgetting, excusing, condonation, or rationalization (47). Griswold therefore aims to offer an account of forgiveness that overcomes the apparent tension between reconciliation and remembrance of past wrongs. For our purposes, it is significant that this account of forgiveness aims to explain how the attitudes toward the past wrong (as well as the wrong-doer) might fittingly alter even though the judgment of the wrong remains unchanged.

With this aim in mind, Griswold argues that the wrong-doer must meet certain conditions that render him worthy of forgiveness. Only then may the victim properly come to forswear revenge, moderate her resentment, commit to letting resentment go altogether, see the wrong-doer in a new light, come to see herself in a new light, and, finally, address the offender and declare that forgiveness is granted (54-58). The experience and expression of regret is among the conditions the wrong-doer must meet, according to Griswold, and not only should regret be communicated and felt, it should also be specific, and, in the paradigm case, it should be addressed to the victim. Furthermore, Griswold holds that the wrong-doer's regretful address should offer a narrative that explains how he came to do wrong, why the wrong does not express who he is as a person, and how he is making himself worthy of forgiveness. The expression of regret takes the form of a story of moral failure and repair that offers the victim an opportunity to relate to the wronged-doer and recognize their shared humanity.

Regret plays an essential role in Griswold's account of forgiveness because it involves emotional appreciation of the past wrong that goes beyond mere acknowledgment and, at the same time, it reflects the offender's newfound commitments and moral outlook. In this way, regret brings the wrong-doer's past, present, and future together by construing the differences between them as distinct stages in the story of a person's moral repair. But while the wrong-doer's regret is a condition for genuine forgiveness, it is forgiveness that warrants the wrong-doer's reconciliation with her wrongful past.¹⁸ When we consider moral regret out of context, abstracting away from its role in processes of moral repair and from its place in the diachronic shape of a person's life, we can only see it as a burdensome state of moral appreciation for which the only remedy is moral blindness. An alternative, and more subtle view emerges once we consider the fitting evolution of regret over time.

4.b. Agential repair:

For an example of a theory of agential repair by way of regret, consider Michael Bratman's account of rational planning in the face of temptation (Bratman 2014). Bratman is concerned with rational planning agency over time, which I called above agential wholeness. In "Temptation and the Agent's Standpoint," Bratman considers a particular problem for norms of

¹⁷ Griswold (2007, xvi) takes the paradigm case to be a case in which forgiveness is a moral relation between two individuals, one of whom has wronged the other, and who (at least in the ideal) are capable of communicating with each other.

¹⁸ However, and as I mentioned in the previous section, while the wrong-doer's reconciliation with her past may involve a diminution in regret and other self-directed negative emotions, such as self-loathing, shame, or guilt, it does not imply that regret is completely extinguished.

rational planning. The problem concerns cases where an agent forms an intention for a future action knowing that when the time for action comes she will be tempted to act contrary to this intention.

As an example, Bratman asks us to consider a case in which an agent forms a general intention – a policy – to have only one glass of wine at dinners. The agent judges that given her wish to work after dinner and despite the pleasure of having two glasses of wine, a one-glass-per-dinner policy is superior to a two-glasses-per-dinner policy. The agent also knows, however, that on each occasion she will be tempted to have a second glass just this once. This temptation will not consist in a failure to act on her judgment, but in a shift of judgment: on each occasion, she will judge that having a second glass just this once is better than having only one glass. She also knows that the judgment shift will be temporary: she will eventually come around to judging, as she does now, that having only one glass of wine at dinner would have been best.

According to a common assumption, an agent should do what she judges best at the time of action. But given that at the time of action the agent judges that a second glass is better, it follows that the agent should act contrary to her initial intention. However, if the agent knows that when the time to follow through comes she will rationally act contrary to her initial intention, how can she rationally form the initial intention? Alternatively, how might it be rational to follow through on the initial intention despite the shift in judgment? It seems that the agential authority the agent has at the time of action conflicts with and overrides her prior agential authority, exercised in the formation of the initial intention.

Bratman argues that the agent's anticipation of regret may change the practical significance of her present evaluative judgment. This is because a planning agent is committed to shaping present thought and action with an eye to how her planned activities will stably look as they develop over time. Therefore, a constitutive feature of a planning agent is that she gives defeasible significance to her present expectations of how she will see relevant matters as her plans and policies unfold (Bratman 2014, 306).¹⁹ For these reasons, there is “a distinctive practical role that may be played by the expectation of future regret” (306):

When faced with the temptation of the second glass, [the agent] at first reconsiders and has a shift of judgment in its favor. But upon even further reflection she anticipates future regret, recognizes the impact on where she stands, and thereby arrives at an evaluative judgment that coheres with her one-glass policy. (308)

Notice, however, that this case is significantly different from *morning train*, the case of agential failure I described in the first section of this article. In *morning train*, an agential failure occurs, fitting regret follows, and subsequently similar failures are avoided. In Bratman's case, agential failure is *prevented* through the *anticipation* of future regret. Nonetheless, I believe the two cases are aligned. The agent's anticipation of future regret in Bratman's dinner case

¹⁹ In more recent work, Bratman “[replaces] this appeal to a concern with how things will look over time with an appeal to a concern with one's self-governance over time; and [he interprets] this concern with one's self-governance over time as an end of the agent's.” For my purposes, what matters is that the new construal gives similar significance to the anticipation of regret. See (Bratman forthcoming, n25).

plausibly draws on the agent's past failures to uphold similar policies.²⁰ The two cases may therefore be understood as portraying different stages, one earlier than the other, in similar processes of agential repair: *morning train* describes the original failure and the instigation of regret and repair, while Bratman's dinner case is concerned with the way in which repair takes place in the aftermath of past failure and regret.

Thus, Bratman's solution to the problem of temptation appeals to the agent's self-understanding in light of past experiences and on the basis of present expectations. Bratman's thought, as I understand it, is that assigning appropriate practical significance to one's present evaluative judgment involves, in part, considering one's practical standpoint across time, understood as "a more or less holistic property of the agent's overall psychological profile" (302-303). An agent's disregard for her past and future points of view constitutes a form of self-dissociation, whereas acting as a coherent agent requires an understanding of one's present point of view as part of a standpoint that persists and evolves over time.²¹ An agent's anticipation of regret draws on her experience and enables her to avoid repeating past agential failures by assigning appropriate weight to her present evaluative judgment. In this way, our memory and self-understanding allow us to correct ourselves and improve our planning agency.²²

Considered apart from diachronic planning agency, regret might seem like an example of agential failure: it turns the agent's gaze backward and thereby distracts her from planning for the future.²³ But a diachronic view of regret in the context of planning agency over time reveals the role of regret in agential repair. Regret is an expression of the fact that an agent's past failures and disappointments are still hers, and it is by appreciating this fact that an agent learns to avoid similar failures and disappointments in the future.

4.c. Ethical repair:

Finally, consider an example of a theory of ethical repair that relies on regret. Ethical repair is concerned with personal failures and misfortunes that undermine a person's sense that her life is meaningful or, as it is sometimes put, justified. For Nietzsche, this is the problem of redemption. Following Nehamas 1985, Lanier Anderson argues that Nietzsche's doctrine of eternal recurrence is "a practical thought experiment applied to an individual's life: one is to

²⁰ Could Bratman's agent rely on her anticipation of regret in the way Bratman suggests if her anticipation were *not* drawn from her personal past-experience of regret, but from, e.g., an impersonal psychological report about the regret she is likely to experience? It seems to me that insofar as such impersonal knowledge about her future regret can lead to adjustments in her present judgment about what to do, this must be due to her personal familiarity with regret.

²¹ Compare Nagel's claim that "failure to be susceptible to prudence entails radical dissociation from one's future, one's past, and from oneself as a whole, conceived as a temporally extended individual" (Nagel 1970, 58).

²² Although Bratman explicitly says that by "regret" he means nothing more than a retrospective negative assessment of one's decision (301n23), it seems to me that his proposal requires a notion of regret that is more robust than that. In particular, if regret is to express the agent's practical standpoint, understood as a broadly coherent point of view that endures over time and guides the agent's self-governance, then regret must involve more than mere negative judgment of an earlier decision.

²³ Bittner (1992) advances such an argument against the rationality of regret.

imagine that ‘This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more’” (Anderson 2005, 197).

By imagining the recurrence of her life, with everything that happened in it, a person may respond to her life as a whole, drawing on the values she endorses. She may condemn the life she has led despite all that was good in it, or she may affirm it despite all that was bad in it. However, the person’s response is not merely evaluative but also constructive, for bad occurrences may be redeemed by one’s retelling of one’s life: “If I can tell my life story in such a way that I *will* the whole, then I can likewise affirm each event within it, in virtue of its essential contribution to the meaning of the whole story. Thus, events that were, considered by themselves, regrettable ... may be affirmed nonetheless” (200).

We can distinguish two stages of evaluation in the doctrine of eternal recurrence as Anderson describes it. Confronted with the diachronic entirety of her life, a person first *reacts* to it, on the basis of the values she holds dear. In this first stage of evaluation, the person grasps what is dreadful in her life and confronts it for what it is, which involves regretting it (202). But the comprehensive and honest appreciation of her life also enables the person to find new interpretations that may change the meaning and importance of past events and make possible a future previously inconceivable. Thus, the second stage of evaluation is *active*. It involves “the construction of a unifying, redemptive story rendering the life meaningful and affirmable” (202). Moreover, by retelling her life story, a person may find new opportunities for action and through them a new future, one that might render her life meaningful by building on her past failures.

As a demonstration of this process of redemption, Anderson describes the case of President Carter (200-202). Carter’s loss to Ronald Reagan in the 1980 election was decisive. His disappointment was immense, as Anderson writes: “[the defeat] not only ended service projects of great importance to him, but also represented a sweeping repudiation of his core values and accomplishments ... [It] threatened to mark the end of his career, and define it as a failure” (200). In other words, the defeat seemed to retroactively undermine the meaning of Carter’s past accomplishments and to conclusively undo the significance of his main life project. How can one live on with the evaluation of one’s life as a failure? What is left for one to aspire to?

After a period of despair, a possible solution occurred to Carter. According to his wife, Rosalynn Carter, one night Carter woke up with the idea of founding a center for dispute mediation (Carter 1987, 31). He went on to found the Carter Center, which would become known for its important work not only in dispute mediation but also in disease eradication, human rights protection, and poverty alleviation. For his accomplishments, Carter won the 2002 Nobel Prize for Peace. His ex-Presidency is widely considered the greatest in U.S. history.

Anderson emphasizes that Carter’s impressive ex-Presidency would not have been possible if it were not for his 1980 defeat. Therefore, says Anderson, “to wish for such an ex-Presidency is also to wish for the defeat, and precisely that fact allows the later successes to redeem the earlier failure” (Anderson 2005, 201). The 1980 defeat no longer defines Carter’s life as a failure, but rather enables its success.

Regret about life-changing decisions and events seems damning; its remedy: either self-deception or forgetfulness. Nevertheless, ethical repair might be possible, not despite regret but through it. By considering our failures and misfortunes as they appear in the context of our whole lives and in the light of our values, we may properly and profoundly regret them. Only then, on the backdrop regret, we may redeem these very same failures and misfortunes by relying on them to construct a different life for ourselves, one worthy of our assent.

5. The case of the young girl's child

I have outlined the structure of a theory of regret that can account for the fitting occurrence and diminution of regret as well as for its relation to subsequent attitudes, emotions, and actions. Regret, I claimed, is an essential component of processes of repair that define moral, agential, and ethical wholeness in the wake of failure. In the previous section, I reviewed existing philosophical accounts of these three kinds of repair that seem to conform to the framework I have suggested. In this section, I will show that the fittingness account sheds new light on a much-discussed case in the recent literature on the rationality of regret, the case of the young girl's child. In fact, I will argue that discussions of the case mistook it as special, and especially puzzling, while it is in fact an instance of a familiar phenomenon, easily captured by the fittingness account.

While discussing the non-identity problem, Derek Parfit introduces the case of a 14-year-old girl who chooses to have a child (Parfit 1984, 358). Due to her young age, she would be unable to give the child a good start in life. She should therefore wait to have a child later. Nevertheless, she has the child and indeed gives him a bad start in life. Parfit argues that her choice is impartially wrong but does not wrong the child since the child would not have existed had she chosen otherwise. Parfit also suggests, following Adams 1979, that the girl need not regret her choice (assuming the child has a life worth living). According to Parfit, though the choice was wrong, it may be rationally favored retrospectively by the young girl due to her love for the child she now has.

Recently, the case has reappeared in discussions of the rationality of regret. Several philosophers have argued that some wrongs or unjustified choices should not be regretted.²⁴ Elizabeth Harman, Jay Wallace, and Kieran Setiya have offered views that distinguish between what the agent should have done and what the agent should now feel about what she did. Once her child exists, the young girl should not regret her unjustified choice. Reasons not to regret, or to prefer the choice she in fact made, are given by her love for the child (Harman 2009b), or by her relationship with the child (Wallace 2013), or by the sheer fact that the child is a person who currently exists (Setiya 2014). On all three accounts, certain valuable upshots warrant a positive retrospective attitude toward one's wrong or unjustified choice.

The case of the young girl is peculiar by design. It involves a choice that is morally wrong but wrongs no one. One might therefore be inclined to treat it as the exception that proves the rule. Perhaps victimless wrongs are the only wrongs that wrongdoers should not regret. Some, however, argue that the young girl harms her future child (Shiffrin 1999; Harman 2009a).

²⁴ I will speak interchangeably of regrettable *choices* and regrettable *actions*. The difference should not matter for our purposes.

Nonetheless, both the young girl and her child seem to have reason not to regret the wrong. In normal cases, one might argue, the victim of a wrong has reason to regret it or at least reason to wish it hadn't happened, and, correspondingly, the agent who committed the wrong also has reason to regret it.

But is the case of the young girl in fact so unusual? First, it suggests that there are wrongs that we should not continue to regret in perpetuity.²⁵ But as we have seen in *birthday part*, *morning train*, and *failed musician* this seems to be true of many wrongs and unjustified choices. Second, the case of the young girl leaves room for appropriate regret. In particular, the case does *not* show that complete lack of regret might be appropriate, for it concerns the young girl's eventual affirmation of her choice and is silent about whether the girl had regretted the choice along the way. If the young girl had never felt the pangs of regret, not even in the moment she realized she should not have had a child at such a young age, she would arguably fail to fully comprehend the significance of her choice. The fact that she should come around to affirming her choice does not imply that she was never required to regret it. Once we see that even in the case of the young girl there is room for appropriate regret, and that affirmation of past wrongs is not unusual, we see that the peculiarity of the case is a red herring. In fact, even the most common cases of wrongs and unjustified choices warrant considerable reconciliation with one's past once the appropriate process of repair is concluded. Cases where it is fitting to regret in perpetuity are the exception.

Harman, Wallace, and Setiya argue that in certain cases an agent's attitude toward one and the same regrettable choice should change once its valuable consequences come to be; these writers disagree about what exactly the consequences are that, once real, warrant a change in the agent's retrospective attitude. By contrast, according to the fittingness account I have proposed, the case of the young girl exemplifies a general fact, namely that an agent's emotions and attitudes toward her regrettable choices fittingly evolve. The reality of certain valuable consequences might impact the fitting evolution of the agent's attitudes, but it is neither the sole reason for such evolution nor a necessary condition for it.

The fittingness account of regret's diminution differs from those of Harman, Wallace, and Setiya in three important ways. While these writers hold that only in a small subset of cases we should cease to regret a regrettable choice, I hold that we should generally cease to regret our regrettable choices, or at least that our initial regret should diminish. However, my proposal also differs from theirs in that they seem to hold that an agent's lack of regret about her regrettable choice may be appropriate independently of the attitudes that preceded it, while I hold that her lack of regret should be preceded by regret. Finally, there is a disagreement about *when* the diminution of regret should occur.²⁶ For Harman the diminution happens as soon as the young girl loves her child, for Wallace it happens as soon as there is a sufficiently robust relationship of a certain sort, and for Setiya it happens as soon as the child exists. However, on my view, the

²⁵ It also suggests, more specifically, that there are wrongs that we should positively affirm. I here emphasize the more general idea that the same choice might warrant incompatible emotions, which I take to be the source of our puzzlement in the case of the young girl. Though we think the young girl should initially regret her choice, we also think her regret should later diminish, if not completely vanish.

²⁶ I thank Selim Berker for bringing this third difference to my attention.

diminution can happen at just about any time, depending on the progression of the fitting process of repair.

In short, on the account I have proposed, we should normally both regret and cease to regret regrettable choices. Furthermore, whether lack of regret is fitting, depends in part on whether the agent regretted the choice in the past. These possibilities have not been considered in debates about the case of the young girl because participants in these debates share a strictly synchronic view of regret: they presuppose that the normative status of the agent's present attitude toward her past choice is independent of her previous attitudes to it. The fittingness account of the diminution of regret makes sense of the idea that incompatible attitudes might both be fitting – they are fitting at different moments – and it explains their interdependency over time – they are components of a single fitting process. Therefore, the fittingness account yields more plausible results than accounts that aim to justify the agent's present attitude independently of its history.

But the fittingness account has an additional, important advantage over the accounts offered by Harman, Wallace, and Setiya. It may be objected that even if these accounts show that the diminution of regret is rationally justified overall, they do not show that the diminution of regret is fitting. Since regret as such is justified by facts pertaining to whether its object is regrettable, and since regret's object lies in the past, forever unchanged, it might be thought that there could be no right kind of reason for the lessening of regret.²⁷ To be sure, the objection continues, we have various wrong-kind reasons to cease to regret, and these reasons may be powerful and even decisive, but they do not make regret any less fitting. Insofar as regret is fitting at all, it continues to be fitting when it no longer contributes to, and even stands in the way of repair.

It is possible to respond on behalf of Harman, Wallace, and Setiya that their accounts in fact land on the right side of the distinction between the fittingness of regret and its overall rational justification. Specifically, it is possible to read these accounts as maintaining that regret ceases to be fitting due to a change in the agent's relation to the object of regret. The young girl now loves her child, or has a certain committed relationship with her child, or simply co-exists with her child, and these changes (or one of them) give her the right kind of reasons to affirm – to prefer, to be glad, or to celebrate – her decision to have a child *and* the right-kind-of-reason not to regret, or not to prefer otherwise.

This reading suggests that the fittingness of an emotion to its object is not fully determined by its object, but also by the agent's relation to it. Whether certain facts give an agent the right kind of reason to regret her choice partly depends on the agent's relation to the choice in question. To be sure, the agent's emotion is a response to its object, but it is a response *expressive of the agent's perspective*. Therefore, the same event might be fittingly regretted by some and not others, it might be fittingly regretted in different ways by different agents, and it might be fittingly regretted *and* affirmed by the same agent from different perspectives. The

²⁷ Compare Moller (2017, 8) on the diminution of grief: "What we have lost remains roughly the same, even as the intensity of our response begins its meteoric dive toward the baseline where it no longer seems to reflect the horror of what has happened."

relational aspect of an emotion's fittingness opens the door to the claim that an agent's regret might cease to be fitting given changes in the agent's relation to the object of regret.

But why should a change in perspective warrant the fitting end of regret when the facts that rendered regret fitting to begin with remain true and relevant to the agent? For example, we have assumed that from the young girl's new perspective as a mother, her choice to have a child at fourteen years of age remains wrong and unjustified and, as such, regrettable from her present perspective. Moreover, the facts that made the choice regrettable – the lost opportunities for her and the bad start in life for her child – have come to pass precisely as predicted and, if anything, their weight is more vivid now than it initially was. The lost opportunities are lost to her *now*, and the child she now loves is the child who had a bad start in life due to her choice. While the arrival of new reasons on the scene – the new love, the new relationship, the new person – might make it rationally justified overall not to regret the choice, why should they make the choice any less regrettable for her? And if the choice is not any less regrettable for her, why should regret be any less fitting?

Consider what Wallace says of the young girl's new deliberative situation once she has her child:

At this point in her life, it is no longer an open question whether to have a child or not; that question has been resolved, for better or worse, and in a way that alters the normative landscape that she inhabits. In particular, there is now an individual human being, her daughter, who both exists and stands in a significant relationship of attachment to her. Actual human beings of this kind make claims on us, however, of a kind that merely possible people do not. We have reason to attend to their needs and interests, to nourish, care for, and support them, particularly if we stand in a parental relationship to them. Moreover, we have reason to cherish and to love them, caring not only for but also *about* them, in ways we do not have reason to care about people who are mere strangers to us. Responding appropriately to the reasons of this kind that her new situation brings in its train, the young girl will naturally affirm and celebrate the existence of her child, cherishing her daughter and her daughter's role in her own life. (Wallace 2013, 89-90)

Wallace's description of the young girl's new predicament as a young mother is plausible, and it is plausible that celebrating the existence of her child is rationally justified for the reasons Wallace articulates. But all this is perfectly compatible with holding that regretting her choice to have a child at age fourteen remains fitting. And it might seem that it is this fact – that regret remains fitting even if it is properly overridden by stronger (wrong kind of) reason not to regret – that deeply troubles us (and, presumably, the young mother) in this case. There might be decisive prudential reason not to regret, decisive moral reason not to regret, or decisive reason of love not to regret, but none of these reasons seem to undermine the appropriateness of regretting a regrettable choice.

This objection to the fitting diminution of regret relies on the assumption I criticized in section 2, according to which it is fitting to *indefinitely* regret what is regrettable. While the fact that the choice was and remains regrettable implies that regretting it is fitting, it does not imply that *regretting it always* is fitting. Rather, the fact that the choice remains regrettable implies that regret is an essential component of a fitting response to the choice. Upon realizing that she had made a wrong or unjustified choice, the young girl fittingly regrets it, but to persist in regret indefinitely would not be fitting to the choice. Alternatively, if the young girl had never regretted her choice, her present lack of regret would be unfitting. The fact that Harman, Wallace, and

Setiya fail to register the rational dependence of the girl's present attitude on her past regret, suggests that they, too, do not conceive of her present attitude as part of an ongoing response to her past choice. The discussion of the case of the young girl has been sidetracked by a focus on isolated moments of reflection in the life of this hypothetical woman, in abstraction from the fitting evolution of her emotions and attitudes over the course of her life.²⁸

The very same facts that, at first, give an agent the right kind of reason to regret can later give the agent the right kind of reason to seek genuine forgiveness (moral repair), to revise her policies and intentions (agential repair), or to find ways to employ the regrettable occurrence in a meaningful way (ethical repair). And whether the subsequent emotions and attitudes are fitting depends on the agent's prior (fitting) regret. Once we adopt a diachronic view of fittingness, we can make sense of the idea that the object of regret remains regrettable after it was fittingly regretted and even when regret is no longer fitting. It remains regrettable because regret continues to play a role in the fittingness of the agent's attitudes and emotions: without past regret no subsequent reconciliation or affirmation would be fitting.²⁹

²⁸ In the course of arguing that the diminution of grief is unfitting, Dan Moller makes the following point: "the fittingness approach to assessing the emotions suggests that within a reasonable range there is a right degree of response, and since we display two different response-levels, they cannot both be right" (Moller 2017, 8). My point in the text is that while "two different response-levels" cannot both be right at once, they can both be right at different stages of one's response. A diachronic view of fittingness allows for the possibility that different response-levels are part of a fitting progression of responses which together make up one's overall (fitting) diachronic response.

²⁹ In working on this paper, I benefited from discussions at the Varieties of Agency workshop at Stanford University and the postdoctoral workshop at the McCoy Family Center for Ethics in Society, also at Stanford. I wish to thank Jorah Dannenberg, David Hills, Barry Maguire, and T. M. Scanlon for reading and commenting on drafts of this article. I extend special thanks to Michael Bratman and Selim Berker who have both given me extensive comments and advice on multiple drafts as well as to Aleksy Tarasenko-Struc for his meticulous and thoughtful notes.

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